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## Alabama to a tee

### Prime season nears for a stunning golf trail that won't put your budget in the rough

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February 15, 2009

PRATTVILLE, Ala.—The view from the first tee of The Judge, one of three courses at the Capitol Hill stop on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, is breathtaking: Spanish moss hanging from the tall oaks on the left, the Alabama River on the right, all of it about 200 feet below.

Between the expanse of river and the stand of trees is a fairway silvered with the early morning dew, the kind of tableau that has drawn an ever-expanding group of friends to this part of the country for the last five or six years. We golf and, in what for some of us is culinary research, eat barbecue. By the end of the day, after at least 36 holes of golf and, in the patois of the barbecue joints we frequent, three meats, we usually are exhausted. It is a great feeling.

During the last 15 years, Alabama has become an unlikely but increasingly popular destination for golf, its combination of world-class courses and affordable greens fees at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail's 11 sites drawing savvy golfers from across the country.

The trail and its individual courses routinely place near the top in golf magazine rankings and not only for affordability, though it is always near the top in that category. The Grand National resort in Opelika and Capitol Hill, here in Prattville, ranked at the top of Golf World magazine's 2009 readers' choice awards.

With good reason. The courses are beautiful and challenging at any level, a difficult combination of tough terrain, sand traps and water hazards that are a good but fun test for serious players and recreational golfers alike. The on-site Marriotts I have stayed at are well-appointed and comfortable; the Renaissance hotels I've seen are fancier.

I suspect that most golfers use them as my group does, leaving them early for their morning tee time and returning late, after a drink or two at the clubhouse and then supper.

Clubhouses at each course, while similarly designed, offer good snacks and meals—mostly the basics, although the breakfast sandwiches make for a good start to any round of golf. The pro shops stock an ample selection of logo clothing and a relatively small selection of equipment. Employees are friendly, their easy drawls charming most Northerners.

But it is what you get for your money that draws most golf fanatics to the RTJ trail.

"You can go to some places and spend an outrageous amount of money," said Mike Pillen, who works at a sporting-goods store in downstate Kewanee. "But here you have great golf for a reasonable amount of money."

Pillen, 47, was at Capitol Hill the same weekend as my group. I did not actually see him. But as my group was leaving—rushing to drive up to Birmingham to catch a plane home—I spotted a truck in the parking lot with a personalized Illinois license plate: Pinhy N 2.

This, Pillen told me after I tracked him down, was his second trip to Alabama for golf. He had heard about the RTJ trail from two sources—a friend and on the Web—and decided to give it a try. This time out, he and two friends made a local motel their base camp and played for five days, leaving early in the morning to drive to different stops across the state.

When Pillen and his friends were finished, they had played 153 holes of great golf.

"There're a lot of holes of golf, and it's reasonably priced. And the courses are in great condition," he said when he was back in Kewanee. "For any purist of a golfer, that's what you want."

Staying outside the resort is the other way to do this trip, and my group has had to avail itself of that option on the rare occasion that we have found the resort hotels booked. In general, the Marriotts and the Renaissance hotels are nicer than the chain motels found along the expressways.

Over the years, I have been to seven of the trail's 11 stops, and I have yet to be disappointed. My favorite location: Grand National in Opelika, with its two courses, the Lake and Links, though the two courses at The Shoals in Muscle Shoals, in the northwest corner of the state, are a close second.

Our getaways are fairly simple. We fly into Birmingham because you can fly there directly from Chicago. We rent a van. We drive to a stop on the trail, and generally they're never too far. Because there are 11 locations, you can choose how far you drive. From the airport this time out, we headed to Opelika, about 2 1/2 hours southeast.

We stay two nights at each resort; it is nice to settle in rather than drive every night. So after Opelika, we headed here to Prattville, staying at what was a nearly identical Marriott.

Of course, the trail offers more than just affordable golf. There are the afternoons when, just as you are teeing off, a blue heron lifts off from the water, or you spot an eagle flying above the piney woods. Yes, you could argue that the golf interrupts such a tranquil scene. But if you are there for golf, it accentuates it.

That was part of the plan when David Bronner conceived of the golf trail. The head of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, Bronner during the late 1980s and early 1990s was frustrated. True, the system was well-funded, his chief responsibility. Nonetheless, he felt as if he had not accomplished all he wanted.

At the same time, Alabama was experiencing a crisis of sorts, when controversy erupted over the site of the 1990 PGA Golf Championship—the Shoal Creek Golf and Country Club, near Birmingham, which had not admitted any African-American members.

"What Alabama didn't understand was that it wasn't a sports-page story," Bronner said in an interview. "It was a front-page story. So what I wanted was to change Alabama."

Bronner lured famed course designer Robert Trent Jones to Alabama to design the trail. Now, golfers who might otherwise head to Florida or the Carolinas come to Alabama for a terrain of mountain, rivers and the Gulf of Mexico, a landscape that Bronner calls "especially blessed."

The result: Since the first trail stops opened in the early 1990s, tourism has seen healthy increases, rising by about 4 million visitors from 2000 to 2007 alone, topping out at 22.4 million. It helps, Bronner said, that many of the locations have other attractions. So the visitor to, say, Hampton Cove courses in Huntsville might also visit the U.S. Space & Rocket Center or see the tall ships when playing Mobile's Magnolia Grove.

Truth be told, my group has not stopped for a single tourist attraction in the years since I've been going to Alabama, unless you consider a barbecue joint at Capitol Hill called Fat Boy's Bar-B-Que Ranch a tourist stop. Bronner said that way of traveling the trail appeals more to couples and older folks who play 18 holes a day and then are looking for something else to do. That is not us. At least not yet.

The trail also has attracted professional golfers with various events from the LPGA Tour, the Champions Tour and the Nationwide Tour. Mostly, though, the trail hopes to attract golfers looking for a fun and affordable trip, one that gets them more golf than they get elsewhere.

Prime time to go? That's March, April and October, said Bronner, when it is cool to cold in Chicago and warm in Alabama. This last late October, we enjoyed days that began chilly—we even had a rare frost delay one morning—and gradually warmed until the afternoon temperature was in the 70s.

Pillen, the Kewanee sports shop employee, said he already has decided to return to Alabama and the trail. His headquarters: here in Prattville. Sounds like a wonderful plan.

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